

Interview with CAPT Paul Jacobs, former commanding officer of USS *Kirk* (DE-1087) from 1974 -1976. Participated in Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, Bethesda, MD, 22 December 2008.

Could you describe the *Kirk*?

The *Kirk* was a destroyer escort converted to a fast frigate. Its mission was primarily ASW with very limited air warfare capabilities. It displaced 4,000 tons and had crew of about 230 plus 22 officers.

What did the sick bay look like?

The sick bay on a frigate is about the size of a small office. All the medical supplies used for the crew members were housed in that space under lock and key and dispersed by a chief corpsman by the name of Burwinkel. He could do minor operations. He could sew up major cuts. He's primarily an independent duty corpsman.

In the spring of 1975 you were ordered to rendezvous with USS *Hancock*. What was that all about?

The *Hancock* came in from San Francisco. We rendezvoused with her in Hawaii. We participated in a Rimpac exercise. When we heard about the potential fall of Saigon, they had to rearrange the *Hancock* by moving the jets off so they could load helicopters they took on from Hawaii. We got underway as their single escort, and the only air asset was my LAMPS helicopter. We proceeded to the San Bernardino Straits. The skipper of the *Hancock* moved the jets around and the helicopters below decks so he could launch the jets prior to entering the San Bernardino Straits. The reason they wanted to do that was because they had the *Midway* coming down from Yokosuka, Japan to rendezvous with the *Hancock* to take on more helicopters in the vacant space they left when the jets went into Cubi Point. We were plane guard for two aircraft carriers in the San Bernardino Straits.

We exited the straits and headed for Cambodia escorting the *Hancock* and its helicopters for the evacuation of Cambodia. The *Hancock* was a World War II aircraft carrier. I think ours was the last voyage they made before being decommissioned.

You went to Singapore for a port call and while you were there you received an "Emergency underway" to return to South Vietnam. What was that all about?

The Singapore port visit was rather unique. We got in about noon or about 2 o'clock when we got the "Emergency underway." We recalled the crew and headed down the river, which has got a 6-knot current so you have to go pretty fast. Most people don't go down there at night because of the danger. We executed the transit and found that the *Hancock* had already taken off. I saw a big supertanker so I got on channel 19 bridge to bridge and said, "Any Maine Maritime guys on board." It turned out the chief engineer was a Maine Maritime. In fact, he knew my father who was an engineering instructor at Maine Maritime Academy.

I told him I needed a big favor. I needed to get up through the straits without having dodge all the ships. "I'd like to pull in behind you and you crank that thing as fast as it will go. My max speed is about 28 knots." You could see the other ships move away as he made a path for us. He probably saved us an hour and a half in transit up there. When we arrived off the coast we took up position about 5,000 yards off the beach.

When you got to South Vietnam on the 28th of April, what did you see out there?

The fall of Saigon had begun. When we looked at our radar scope you could see contacts on there. There were so many contacts that the screen was becoming white as small boats were heading out to sea. It looked like Dunkirk in reverse. There were just a horrendous number small boats coming out. And we started picking them up at noon on the 29th.

At one time you told me that you and the crew watched these helicopters flying over looking for large platforms to land on--carriers, amphibians and the like. You guys thought you were being bypassed. You weren't going to be part of the action. So you were wishing that one of these carriers would pick your flight deck.

Even though there were a lot of flight decks out there, there weren't enough big flattops to handle all the helicopters that I saw flying overhead.